Eucharist, Racism, and Black Bodies

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you, for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.[1]

The Eucharistic gift consists in the fact that in it love forms one body with our body.[2]

The mere linguistic convergence of *Eucharist* and *racism* disturbs. It makes us queasy, uncomfortable. It should. Bringing these realities together defies all religious, theological, and moral logic, for they signify opposing horizons of meaning. Eucharist and racism implicate bodies—raced and gendered bodies, the body of Christ. The meaning of Eucharist not only lies beyond the immediacy of corporeality, it also joins the body's ultimate transformation and the supernatural destiny of the human person. ("In my flesh I shall see God," Job 19:26.) Eucharist relies upon resurrection faith and eschatological imagination. Racism focuses on and interprets the body through an aesthetic scale that

hypostatizes phenotype; it rests on the separation of humanness from body.

Eucharist radiates from the trajectory set by the dangerous memory of the audacious rabbi from Nazareth, who asserted that "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. . . . For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (John 6:53, 54). These words evoke Jesus' great nourishing sacrificial gift of his own life in the struggle to bring about his Father's dream of love, mercy, joy, and peace.

In Christian worship, Eucharist commemorates the meal that Jesus ate with his friends on Passover only hours before he died. Like millions of Jews before him and millions of Jews after him, in this ritual meal Jesus acknowledged, blessed, and praised God, who, through mighty acts, chose, liberated, guided, protected, nourished, sustained, and ennobled a people. The words and gestures of Jesus at that Passover meal and its bloody aftermath embody the etymology of the Greek verb *eucharistein*, that is, "proper conduct of one who is the object of a gift."[3]

The fullest meaning of Eucharist goes well beyond a mere attitude of thankfulness and presses with eager yearning for concrete outward evidence of gratitude that indicates the gift is "effective and present."[4] Eucharist is that inalienable gift that anchors believers in time, connects them one to another as well as to their origin, intimates their future, and "concentrate[s] the greatest imaginary power and, as a consequence, the greatest symbolic value."[5] Eucharist is of inestimable value: no rate of exchange, no price can be set on the gracious, gratuitous, unmerited gift that Eucharist is. No medium of exchange can calibrate the meaning of Christ as God's gift or the meaning of Christ's self-gift in bread and wine.

The sacramental meal of the Christian church grows from these notions of thanksgiving and gift. In this meal, the community of the faithful acknowledges, blesses, and praises the gratuitous gift of Jesus Christ. His ministry and his being effect for us

the very conditions of the possibility of claiming the gift of his body, person, and spirit; to dwell within the horizon of the *magnalia Dei*. Thus we embrace his Father as our own and seal our pledge to incarnate the triune love of God through acts of concrete compassion and solidarity in the here-and-now.

But, above all, Eucharist denotes the great mystery of the very presence of Christ in the sacrament. Through the compassionate love of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit, the body and blood of Jesus Christ are present with us and to us. In sacramental reception, his self-gift nourishes, strengthens, and orders us as we make visible his body through a praxis of solidarity, which counters the disorder of this world. Eucharist signifies and makes visible the body raised up by Christ for himself within the body of humanity, the "mystical body" through which the domain of Jesus' body is extended, a counter-sign to the encroaching reign of sin.

Racism opposes the order of Eucharist. Racism insinuates the reign of sin; it is intrinsic evil. As structural or systemic, racism goes beyond prejudice or even bigotry by binding negative or vicious feelings or attitudes to the exercise of putatively legitimate power. Racism is both an ideology and a set of practices. It does not rely on the choices or actions of a few individuals; rather, racism infiltrates, permeates, and deforms the institutions of politics, economy, culture, even religion.[6] Racism exploits the interdependence of individuals in and upon society through the formulation of ideology. Ideology as a mental construction may be defined as a biased way of thinking, which justifies and maintains an iniquitous way of living.[7] Not only does racism ignite pseudo-rationality, incite vicious practices and violent acts, it poisons the racist—crippling a woman's or a man's potential for authentic religious, cultural, social, moral, psychological, and spiritual growth.

As intrinsic evil, racism is lethal to bodies, to black bodies, to the body of Christ, to Eucharist. Racism spoils the spirit and insults the holy; it is idolatry. Racism coerces religion's transcendent orientation

to surrender the absolute to what is finite, empirical, and arbitrary, and contradicts the very nature of a religion. Racism displaces the Transcendent Other and selects and enthrones its own deity.

For more than four hundred and fifty years on the North American continent, greed, law, labor, and violence consumed the bodies of black women and men. If, since the first Eucharist, a "hurting body has been the symbol of solidarity for Christians,"[8] how are we to grasp the relation of Eucharist to hurting black bodies? In a context of white racist supremacy, what is the position and condition of black bodies? If the Eucharistic meal is that ritual which celebrates the redemption of the body, then how do the sign and reality (*res et sacramentum*) of Eucharist contest the marginal position and condition of black bodies?

In the following pages, I consider, first, the wounding, then, terrorizing of the black body through commodification, abuse, and lynching. The questions raised above can admit no idealized or bloodless evaluation of Eucharist or its doctrinal articulation, for the Eucharist memorializes the death of Jesus in a "first-century lynching."[9] By this dangerous memory, "we are formed into a body which transfigures the world's violence through self-sacrifice and reconciliation."[10] But, since our formation takes place in "a situation in which authenticity cannot be taken for granted,"[11] notions and speech about self-sacrifice and reconciliation are suspect. A third section considers what it might mean, through practices of Eucharistic solidarity, to embody Christ in a social context shaped by "violent normalcy."[12]

Wounding the Body of a People

The Atlantic slave trade wounded the very body of Africa. Human loss reverberated in personal and communal life. Before the continent became a hunting ground, before "Africans"[13] were commodities, they were social subjects. As such, women and men held

place and standing in their communities, supported dependents and upheld obligations, nurtured hopes and dreams. Kidnap and seizure, whether by force or by deception, not only required that the captive redefine her or his personal and social identity but also that those left behind do so as well. The disappearance of a spouse or parent could translate into deprivation; the loss of a child or sibling could cause depression, perhaps even madness. However, as historian Stephanie Smallwood suggests, "The indelible bonds of kinship meant that once out of sight, [the] departed could never be out of mind."[14]

Sociologist Orlando Patterson has argued that slavery was social death.[15] But this death was quite unlike death as understood by pre-colonial West African peoples. For these cultural groups, the dead remained intimately connected to the living. The honored dead, the Ancestors, were capable of intervening in daily affairs, bestowing blessing, or meting out punishment. And, if one had lived a good life, he or she could expect to cross the *kalunga* line, which separated the world of the dead from the land of the living, and to reemerge recognizable in the bodies of grandchildren or future generations.[16] But the captive African disappeared into a kind of netherworld—physically severed from kin and community, ritually removed from cultural ceremonies of honorable death, metaphysically cut off from the ancestral realm. The captured were now among the dead who still lived; the Atlantic became the *kalunga* line and their bodies were carried beyond a point of no return.

However, Smallwood suggests that some Atlantic African communities believed that persons who were sold into slavery did return. But they did so "transmuted as wine and gunpowder, on the material plane of commodities—an idea suggesting that the special violence of commodification produced not only social death, but more ominous still a kind of total annihilation of the human subject."[17] Commodification wounded the captive body, mocking its marginality, its "loss of natality as well as honor and power."[18] The Atlantic market for slaves consumed those bodies

and "through its language, its categories, its logic," made it impossible for the Africans to return to their communities, to take up being human without wound.[19]

Scholars estimate that roughly ten to twelve million human beings, "fifty or sixty thousand a year in the peak decades between 1700 and 1850,"[20] were drawn through the "door of no return."[21] Abolitionist agitation may have brought about an end to the importation of captured Africans into England in 1807 and the United States in 1808. But legislation ended neither the slave trade nor slavery, which persisted in Brazil until 1888.

> In the seven decades between the Constitution (1787) and the Civil War, approximately one million enslaved people were relocated from the upper South to the lower South according to the dictates of the slaveholders' economy, two thirds of these through a pattern of commerce that soon became institutionalized as the domestic slave trade.[22]

Buyers and sellers mingled in auction houses and slave pens. Potential buyers examined black bodies for signs of illness or injury or scars from beatings. They inspected teeth, prodded and manipulated muscle and joints. But black bodies could also be disguised, "disciplined into order and decorated for market . . . packaged for sale."[23] Hired out to a Missouri slave trader by the name of James Walker, William Wells Brown recalled in his narrative how he was instructed to shave the grizzled facial hair of men and pull out or darken grey strands to hide age.[24] Slaveholders were literally looking for sound, "likely"[25] bodies, predictive of not only skill, physical stamina and prowess but also the growth and stability of plantation wealth.

James Martin gave this description of an auction to an interviewer:

> Slaves [were] put in stalls like the pens they use for cattle—a man and his wife with a child on each arm. And, there's a curtain, sometimes just a sheet over the front of the stall, so the

> bidders can't see the "stock" too soon. The overseer's standin' just outside with a big blacksnake whip and a pepperbox pistol in his belt. Across the square a little piece, there's a big platform with steps leading to it. Then . . . the overseer drives the slaves out to the platform, and he tells the ages of the slaves and what they can do. . . . When the slaves is on the platform—what they calls the 'block'—the overseers . . . makes 'em hop, he makes 'em trot, he makes 'em jump.[26]

W. L. Bost said that he would "hear [the auctioneer's] voice as long as [he lived]."[27] Willis Coffer recalled that after being herded into the pens, black people were put on scales and weighed, but generally their value was assessed by skill. Young women of childbearing age and skilled workers—for example, carpenters or masons or smiths—often were priced from two thousand to five thousand dollars respectively. Male and female field hands sold for a few hundred dollars.[28] "At these auction-stands," Brown wrote, "bones, muscles, sinews, blood and nerves, of human beings, are sold with as much indifference as a farmer in the north sells a horse or sheep."[29] Slavery blurred "the line between things and persons."[30] The subjection of black bodies to exchange rates and the logic of the market wounded black being. Moreover, slavery conformed those bodies to the "ideological imperatives of slaveholding culture—whiteness, independence, rationality, necessity, patriarchy, paternalism, and fancy."[31]

Slavery was a moral fiction riddled with contradictions. Enslaved women and men may have been deemed valuable, but they were nonetheless subordinated to the overweening power of the slaveholder. Moreover, as Patterson states, "no society took the position that the slave, being a thing, could not be held responsible for [his] actions."[32] What was the extent and scope of the slaveholder's or his/her delegate's disciplinary action? "The conch shell blowed afore daylight," Mary Reynolds said, "and all hands had better git out for roll call or Solomon [the overseer] bust down the door and git them out. It was hard work, git beatin's and half-fed."[33]

Enslaved people judged too slow or inexact in performance of their duties could expect harsh punishment. Charlie Moses recounted beatings, whippings, even shootings when "slaves done something to displease [Master Rankin]."[34] According to Fannie Griffin, slaveholder Joe Beard treated the enslaved people fairly, but his wife Grace did not: "She whip us a heap of times. When she go to whip me, she tie my wrists together with a rope and put that rope through a big staple in the ceiling and draw me off the floor and give me a hundred lashes."[35] Richard Carruthers described the cruelty of an overseer by the name of Tom Hill.

> Hill used to whip me and the other [slaves] if we don't jump quick enough when he holler and he stake us out like you stake out a hide and whip till we bleed. Sometime he take salt and rub on the [slave] so he smart and burn and suffer misery.[36]

Thomas Cole sympathized with other enslaved people on plantations where "the owners shore was bad." One nearby planter, Cole said, beat the people frequently and he described this common punishment:

> After strippin' 'em off plum naked, [the slaveholder] would have dem tied hand and foot, and bends dem ovah, and runs a pole 'tween de bend in de arms at the elbow and under de legs at de knees, and whip dem wid a cat-o'-nine-tails till he bust de hide in lots of places 'cross deir backs, and blood would run offen dem on de groun'. Den he would put salt in dose raw places, specially iffen dey makes out lak dey wants ter fight or sasses him.[37]

"What I hated most was when they'd beat me," Reynolds said, "and I didn't know what they beat me for, and I hated them strippin' me naked." There was more that could be said about life on the Kilpatrick plantation, Reynolds insinuated, but chose not to do so. During slavery, she said, "they was things past tellin', but I got the scars on my old body to show to this day."[38] The bodies of enslaved women (and men) were torn open, lacerated, and punctured at the whim or rage of sadistic power. Yet, these marks of

oppression also signal the enslaved people's consciousness of their condition and their willingness to assert themselves.

Lavinia Bell was stolen as an infant from freeborn parents in Washington, D.C., and held in bondage in Texas. From the age of fourteen, she repeatedly tried to escape, but, lacking knowledge of the geographic terrain, each time she was overtaken and returned to Master Whirl. The mistress of the plantation took pity on Bell and explained the directional location as well as symbolic and political meaning of the North Star (freedom) and its goal (Canada). Reportedly, Bell started out on foot and reached Mississippi; there she gave birth to twins, one of whom was stillborn. Again, Whirl overtook and reclaimed her. Upon return to Texas, Whirl "slit both [Lavinia Bell's] ears, then branded her on the back of her left hand with a hot iron, cut off with an axe the little finger of her right hand, searing the wound with hot iron, and also branded her on her stomach."[39] When the slaveholder learned that Bell had urged other enslaved people on his plantation to escape, he tortured her to force her to inform on the person who had told her about Canada.

> She with the spirit of a martyr, refused to give any information, whereupon he had her fixed in what is there technically termed a "buck." This was doubling her in two, until her legs were passed over her head, where they were kept by a stick passed across the back of her neck. . . . While in this position she was whipped. The wounds caused by the lash were rubbed with salt and water, and pepper.[40]

Despite repeated whippings, branding, and a severed finger, Lavinia Bell refused to surrender to slavery. During previous escape attempts, Bell had carried her child with her into what she surely must have hoped would be a new life. But, when she was arrested in Zanesville, Ohio, under the Fugitive Slave Law, her little son was taken from her. When Lavinia Bell told her story in Montreal, Canada, it was as an appeal to raise funds to purchase the freedom of her child.

The Christian reader, perhaps, will best grasp the import of these excerpts, if they are understood as passages from a "Martyrology of Black Freedom." These accounts bear poignant comparison not only to the persecution of Christians but to the torture and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The humiliation of women and men and children on the auction block; the whipping, staking, and salting; the scars, lacerations, and lesions on the bodies of Fannie Griffin, Richard Carruthers, Mary Reynolds, Lavinia Bell, and countless others encode immeasurable and unnecessary suffering. Their wounds constitute another stigmata. These "hieroglyphics of the flesh"[41] not only expose human cruelty, but disclose the enslaved people's moral grasp of the inalienable sacredness, dignity, and worth of their humanity.

Mary Reynolds directs us obliquely to her scarred body, which evokes memory of the scarred body of the Risen Christ. Standing before Thomas, the Lord of Life seals his identity with the crucified Jesus of Nazareth by displaying his wounds. The apostle does not touch him but surely traces the wounds with his eyes, retrieving his relationship with the rabbi he came to love (John 20: 19-23). We cannot trace with our fingers or eyes the scars on the bodies of Mary Reynolds or Lavinia Bell. If we could do so, their bodies might disclose wounds that, perhaps, might scald our eyes and fingers, our minds and hearts. Lavinia Bell's broken body communicates the risk of enfleshing freedom. The marks on her flesh identify her, tell us who she is, and bear witness to her desire and agency. Defying a universe in which she had been rendered *no-thing*, Lavinia Bell achieved God's gracious gift of her humanity.

Slavery was social sin: it was moral and physical evil acted out on black bodies. Sin is a personal and individual act, yet it affects social or public institutions and structures. Moreover, through direct and voluntary participation, approbation, silence, and protection, ordinary women and men participate, even benefit, from that sin. Slavery was a national social sin. But with its legal demise,

the practices and attitudes that had sustained it were extended through various means, none more horrific than lynching.

Terrorizing the Body of a People

Organized challenge to lynching dates to the turn-of-the-century campaigns led by journalist Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. DuBois, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).[42] Their work attracted the support of the black community as well as some influential white political allies. However, "with the upsurge of mass movements during the thirties," Angela Davis contends, "white people began to take a more active role in antilynching efforts."[43] In December 1951, famed artist, cultural leader, and human rights advocate Paul Robeson, along with a small group of black lawyers, municipal officials, scholars, and family members of lynch victims, appealed to the United Nations, charging the United States Government with the crime of genocide against its black citizens.[44]

This protest gained little attention outside the black press. But four years later in 1955, Mrs. Mamie Till Bradley, the mother of murdered fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till, challenged the nation to confront its legacy of social sin in racial hatred. Mrs. Bradley had sent her son from Chicago to visit relatives near Money, Mississippi. Till, unfamiliar with the codes and constraints of Southern segregation, took up a dare to speak to a white female shopkeeper, Carolyn Bryant. What precisely young Till said to Bryant as he made a purchase in her husband's store may never be known, but she accused him of an impertinent remark and whistling at her. Three days later, Emmett Till was dead. His mother insisted upon an open coffin for her son in order to show the world the ravages of lynchlike violence and mutilation.[45] The men charged and tried for Till's murder, Carolyn Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant, and J. W. Milam, were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury.

Forty-three years later, another lynchlike murder occurred in Jasper, Texas. On the night of June 7, 1998, James Byrd was chained by his feet to the back of a pickup truck by three white men and dragged for nearly three miles until he died and his body was partially dismembered.[46] While Emmett Till's murder had been sanctioned culturally and legally by nearly all sectors of white society, Byrd's murder elicited from both blacks and whites revulsion, horror, shame, sorrow, and "Christian forgiveness."[47]

Lynching was a capricious instrument of terror that Southern as well as Northern whites used to deconstruct the new order of political and economic relations that the Union victory achieved and the amended U.S. Constitution affirmed. Between the end of the Civil War and 1968, ordinary white men and women, tacitly or actively, legitimated the lynching of more than five thousand black men and women. The alleged reasons for lynching blacks included homicide, assault, robbery and theft; but the grounding reasons for lynching were insult to whites, rape, and attempted rape.[48] Most basically, however, lynching sought to restore and maintain white dominance or supremacy, to monitor and control the boundaries of racial caste and class.[49]

The spectacle of a castrated, mutilated, lynched, and burnt black man or woman aimed to intimidate and pacify purportedly restive blacks. And, as James McGovern argues, it also put whites on notice that anyone "who balked at the caste system and attempted to initiate personal as against caste relationships with blacks ran the risk of severe social ostracism, especially in the small towns and rural areas."[50] Northerners deemed lynching revolting, but as George Frederickson points out, their "opposition to it was a limited and ineffectual phenomenon."[51]

On April 28, 1899, in Georgia, Sam Hose, a black farm laborer, was charged with killing his white employer in a quarrel over wages.[52] In the presence of a crowd of more than 2000 people, Hose was first tortured before being doused with oil and burned. *The Springfield* (Massachusetts) *Weekly Republican* recorded these events:

> Before the torch was applied to the pyre, the [N]egro was deprived of his ears, fingers and genital parts of his body. He pleaded pitifully for his life while the mutilation was going on, but stood the ordeal of fire with surprising fortitude. Before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones crushed into small bits, and even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate was torn up and disposed of as "souvenirs." The Negro's heart was cut into several pieces, as was also his liver. Those unable to obtain the ghastly relics direct paid their more fortunate possessors extravagant sums for them. Small pieces of bones went for 25 cents, and a bit of liver crisply cooked sold for 10 cents.[53]

In Helena, Arkansas, in 1921, nineteen year-old William Turner was alleged to have assaulted a white telephone operator, but he was never brought to trial. William Turner was lynched, not once, but twice: after one mob of whites lynched him, a second mob cut down his body and burned it in a bonfire in front of city hall. The *St. Louis Argus* reported that Turner's body

> was hauled through Helena to provide a moving target for white men armed with pistols who lined the principal streets of this town. . . . Turner's corpse was roped to the rear end of an automobile and driven up and down the main streets of Helena at various speeds as white men hooted, yelled, and perfected their marksmanship by shooting at the almost disintegrating remains. No colored folks were allowed on the streets. When the celebrants had had their fill, the body was burned.[54]

To further demonstrate their supremacy, these white men forced August Turner, William Turner's father, to remove the battered and charred remains of the body of his son.

Jeff Brown was lynched by a mob in Cedar Bluff, Mississippi, in 1916. Walking down a street near railway tracks, Brown spotted a train headed in the direction in which he wished to travel. The *Birmingham Voice of the People* reports that Brown ran to board the moving train and accidentally brushed against a young white girl, who was standing on the sidewalk. She screamed.

> A gang quickly formed and ran after Brown, jerking him off the moving train. He was beaten into insensibility and then hung to a tree. The sheriff has made no attempt to find out who the members of the mob were. Picture cards of the body are being sold on the streets at five cents apiece.[55]

James Allen has collected, displayed, and published portions of his extensive collections of picture cards and photographs depicting lynching. *Without Sanctuary, Lynching Photographs in America*[56] evinces social sin. With seeming nonchalance, the "celebrants" sent these grim souvenirs as postcards to friends and relatives, parents and siblings through the U.S. Mail. These photographs reveal as much about the racist orgiastic behavior of a white mob bent on consuming black bodies as they do about the fear, pain, and anguish of lynched men and women. The images bend credulity; the viewer does not know where to direct the eye. A flood of feeling rises: pity, sorrow, anger at the burnt body; horror, shame, anger at human arrogance, at the furious glee on the faces of those who preside over what sociologist Orlando Patterson names a "feast of blood."[57]

Lynching was a potent weapon of spatial and social control. Lynching regulated black motion and movement—restricting not only where blacks were to sit or eat or walk or recreate or shop but also how they were to comport themselves during these activities. It policed all relations between blacks and whites, demanding the protection of white women. From Reconstruction until well into the twentieth century, lynching reasserted and secured white power and authority over black bodies. During slavery, power and authority over those bodies rested with slaveholders; that power and authority could be extended to other whites with tacit or active permission. But not all whites were slaveholders, and not all black bodies were enslaved. Lynching salvaged and resituated the overweening power of the slaveholder in "whiteness" and assuaged Southern defeat with its privilege. Functionally, lynching purged blacks from the (white) body politic and usurped those legal rights and duties accorded to

them by the Thirteenth Amendment, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.[58]

Lynching objectified black bodies, rendering the bodies of Emmett Louis Till, James Byrd, Sam Hose, William Turner, and Jeff Brown—indeed, all black bodies—visible and vulnerable. These men, along with countless others who shared their fate, claim a place in the "Martyrology of Black Freedom." Their torture and death by hanging on a tree mirrors the torture and death of another dark man on Golgotha.

The Cross and the Lynching Tree

"Strange Fruit," as sung by blues legend Billie Holiday, offers a haunting image of the mangled, battered black body:

> Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
> Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
> Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
> The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
> Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
> And the sudden smell of burning flesh!
> Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
> For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
> For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop.
> Here is a strange and bitter crop.[59]

Billie Holiday called "Strange Fruit" her "personal protest" not only against lynching but also against the myriad physical and psychic humiliations inflicted daily on black bodies.[60] While "Strange Fruit" emerged from particular historical and social circumstances, the song evokes resonance with a most potent and sacred symbol of Christianity—the cross.

Black literary artists discerned the relation between the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and the lynching of black men and women.

Among others, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and W. E. B. Du Bois have portrayed the symbolic meaning of the "tree of the cross" in the lynching tree.[61] But, as James Cone has remarked, "This connection failed to ring a theological bell in the imagination of white theologians and their churches."[62] Nor do black theologians and preachers evade Cone's critique: most have failed to make explicit connection between the cross and the lynching tree.

The collusion of Christianity and Christian theology in human oppression is unquestionable. What remains shocking is "the reality of significant Christian participation in, if not instigation of, a crime as odious as lynching."[63] What made lynching possible, acceptable? Why did so many devout Christian men and women embrace ritual cross burning and invest it with such power? How could "good" Christians twist the tree of the cross into the lynching tree?

Patterson disentangles an ugly web of psychological, religious, and social meanings: In the aftermath of the Civil War, white Southerners were forced to rethink their conceptions both of themselves and of the former enslaved people. They responded in two ways: on the one hand, whites constructed a paternalistic fantasy of the humble, childlike, uncomplaining, faithful slave, who could not survive outside slavery.[64] On the other hand, whites recoiled from the nascent success of blacks and viewed the newly freed people as a threat to their superiority. Blacks—males in particular—were deemed menacing to the sexual purity of white women. In fear and loathing, propped up by a version of fundamentalist Christianity, Southern whites conflated blacks with a "satanic presence" that must be eliminated.[65] Lynching was the instrument by which black bodies were to be purged from the (white) body politic. Then, in a mental leap of "profound theological inconsistency,"[66] whites deliberately associated the scapegoat sacrifice of blacks with the mocked, tortured, crucified Christ. "The cross—Christianity's central symbol of Christ's sacrificial death—became identified with the crucifixion of the Negro, the dominant symbol of the Southern Euro-American supremacist's civil religion."[67]

Tracing the philosophical and theological roots of an "heretical tradition" of oppressive Christianity, Kelly Brown Douglas makes explicit the connection between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black bodies. While not the focal point of her argument, lynching, she states, "reveals the utter evil of white terror against black bodies [and] brings the gravity of Christianity's connection to black oppression into sharp focus."[68] Douglas traces Christianity's disdain for matter and for the body (some bodies more than others) as well as its uneasiness with nonprocreative sex to uncritical absorption of Platonic and Stoic ideals. "The integration of these two philosophies into Christian thought," she contends, "produced a tradition driven by dualistic thinking and ascetic sentiments."[69] This heretical tradition accounts for Christian persecution of the Jews, Christian participation in the oppression and persecution of others (including indigenous people and women), as well as Christian alliance with dubious political power.[70] Moreover, a version of this tradition was assimilated into Southern evangelical Protestantism and, during and after Reconstruction, shaped the cultural and social, moral and "theological consciousness of those whites who were party to black lynchings."[71]

Douglas exposes as well the poignant "paradox" of black people's confession and affirmation of Christianity, "the very religion others use to justify their shameful treatment."[72] To live with and within such paradox requires not only enormous psychological strength and "a powerful religious imagination,"[73] but absolute belief that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Compassion of the Triune God, denounces this heretical distortion. James Cone writes:

> The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. . . . need each other: the lynching tree can liberate the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians. . . . The cross can redeem the lynching tree, and thereby bestow upon lynched black bodies an eschatological meaning for their ultimate existence.[74]

The cross of Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates, at once, the redemptive potential of love and the power of evil and hatred. On the cross, Jesus overcame evil with great love; his resurrection disclosed the limits of evil. But the cross can never be reduced to a cheap or simplistic solution to the problem of evil. The cross and the lynching tree represent unmeasured suffering and anguish. To place maimed lynched bodies beside the maimed body of Jesus of Nazareth is the condition for a theological anthropology that reinforces the sacramentality of the body, contests objectification of the body, and honors the body as the self-manifestation and self-expression of the free human subject. Slavery, lynching, and their extension in white racist supremacy aimed to de-create black bodies and desecrate black humanity. As intrinsic moral social evil, these vicious practices waged a frontal challenge to (black) bodies as mediators of divine revelation, as signifiers of the sacred reality that being human is.[75]

In the previous chapter, I sketched out a meaning of solidarity as commitment to exploited, despised, poor women of color as basic to the realization of our humanness. Examples in this chapter reinforce that commitment. Solidarity begins in an *anamnesis*, which intentionally remembers and invokes the black victims of history, martyrs for freedom. Theologically considered, their suffering, like the suffering of Jesus, seeds a new life for the future of all humanity. Their suffering, like the suffering of Jesus, anticipates an enfleshment of freedom and life to which Eucharist is linked ineluctably. Eucharist, then, is countersign to the devaluation and violence directed toward the black body.

Eucharistic Solidarity: Embodying Christ

The idolatrous practices of slavery, lynching, and white racist supremacy violate black bodies, blaspheme against God, and defame the body of Christ. Such intrinsic evil threatens the communion (*communio*) that is the mediation and the fruit of

Eucharist. On more than one occasion, Augustine reminded us that the Eucharist is "the symbol of what we are."[76] He identified sacrament (*sacramentum*) with "revealing sign" (*sacrum signum*), that which discloses something (*res*) or Someone hidden or concealed. Sacraments disclose, mediate, and express, writes David Power, the "abiding presence of Christ's mystery in the world wherein the Church is united with Christ as his Body through the gift and action of the Spirit."[77] Sacraments form and orient us to creation, to human persons, and, above all, to the Three Divine Persons. Sacraments pose an order, a counter-imagination, not only to society but also to any ecclesial instantiation that would substitute itself for the body of Christ.

Sacramentality signifies the real-symbolic unity between what we are as humans, even as the de-creation of black bodies clarifies the cost of daring to em-body Christ in a morally degraded context of white racist supremacy. What might it mean to em-body Christ? What might it mean, in the here-and-now, to reveal his abiding but hidden presence in our world, to be the body of Christ? What might it mean to invest exploited, despised black bodies with eschatological meaning?

In the previous chapter, I proposed that solidarity has a discernable structure, with cognitive, affective, effective, constitutive, and communicative dimensions. A praxis of solidarity arises from apprehension and heartfelt response to accounts of historic and contemporary abuse and violence directed against black bodies. Protests against slavery and agitation for abolition rightly may be read as forms of solidarity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Women and men, black and white—including David Walker, Maria Stewart, William Wilberforce, Frederick Douglass, Prudence Crandall, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and William Lloyd Garrison—incarnated such solidarity. In her reflection on the intentionality behind the lyrics and style of performance of "Strange Fruit," philosopher Angela Davis makes a compelling nontheological case for human openness and solidarity:

> If those touched by "Strange Fruit" were left feeling pity for black victims of racism instead of compassion and solidarity, this pity would have recapitulated rather than contested the dynamics of racism. It would have affirmed rather than disputed the superior position of whiteness. But unless one is an incurable racist, it is difficult to listen to Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" without recognizing the plea for human solidarity, and thus for the racial equality of black and white people in the process of challenging racist horrors and indignities. Her song appeals to listeners of all ethnic backgrounds to identify the "black bodies swinging in the southern breeze" as human beings with the right to live and love.[78]

Davis recognizes that cognitive and affective dimensions alone remain inadequate; awareness and pity merely nod toward solidarity. Awareness and pity must be strengthened, extended, and enriched through personal encounter, responsible intellectual preparation, and healing and creative action for change in society. We shoulder suffering and oppression; we take up a position beside exploited and despised black bodies. Further, solidarity involves critique of self, of society, of church. This critique takes on and includes existential reflection, historical scrutiny, presence to memory, social analysis, acknowledgment and confession of sin, authentic repentance—change of heart, change of life, change of living.

A Christian praxis of solidarity denotes the humble and complete orientation of ourselves before the lynched Jesus, whose shadow falls across the table of our sacramental meal. In his raised body, a compassionate God interrupts the structures of death and sin, of violation and oppression. A divine praxis of solidarity sets the dynamics of love against the dynamics of domination—recreating and regenerating the world, offering us a new way of being in relation to God, to others, to self.

Eucharistic Solidarity

Our daily living out, and out of, the dangerous memory of the torture and abuse, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitutes

us as his own body raised up and made visible in the world. As *his body*, we embrace with love and hope those who, in their bodies, are despised and marginalized, even as we embrace with love and forgiveness those whose sins spawn the conditions for the suffering and oppression of others. As *his body*, we pulse with new life, for Eucharist is the heart of Christian community. We know in our bodies that eating the bread and drinking the wine involve something much deeper and far more extensive than consuming elements of the ritual meal. Eucharistic solidarity is a virtue, a practice of cognitive and bodily commitments oriented to meet the social consequences of Eucharist. We women and men strive to become what we have received and to do what we are being made.

Eucharist is countersign to the devaluation and violence directed toward the exploited, despised black body. The liturgical narrative for Eucharistic celebration does not "directly expose a tortured body, but points implicitly to it, a body that carries the marks of violence."[79] Yet such implicit pointing requires explicit resistance to the antiliturgy that racism performs. Eucharistic solidarity opposes all intentionally divisive segregation of bodies on the specious grounds of preference for race or gender or sexual orientation or culture. Eucharistic solidarity contests any performance of community as "an atomized aggregate of mutually suspicious individuals"[80] or as self-righteously self-sustaining or as historically innocent or as morally superior or as monopoly on truth. In spatial inclusion, authentic recognition, and humble embrace of different bodies, Eucharistic celebration forms our social imagination, transvalues our values, and transforms the meaning of our being human, of embodying Christ.

To put it compactly, embodying Christ is discipleship, and discipleship is embodied praxis. This praxis is the embodied realization of religious, cognitive, and moral conversion.[81] Commitment to intentional and conscious Eucharistic living initiates a change of direction in the personal and social living of an individual as well as the living of many. Eucharistic solidarity challenges us in living out the implications and demands of discipleship. Prerogatives

rooted in socially constructed disparities are deconstructed. We become aware of ourselves as striving to realize concretely the fruitful insights of practical intelligence and rectitude. Eucharistic solidarity orients us to the cross of the lynched Jesus of Nazareth, where we grasp the enormity of suffering, affliction, and oppression as well as apprehend our complicity in the suffering, affliction, and oppression of others.

Eucharistic solidarity sustains our praxis of discipleship as we stand the ground of justice in the face of white racist supremacy, injustice, and domination; take up simplicity in the lure of affluence and comfort; hold on to integrity in the teeth of collusion; contest the gravitational pull of the glamour of power and evil. Yet, in our agitation for social justice, whether in church or in society, we cannot surrender to the temptation to secure "gains" only for "our" specific group. Too often this approach has deflected attention from our suffering sisters and brothers and "concealed the [fact] that a lasting transformation of society can never rest on a movement based on the ideology of getting more—no matter how just these demands may be."[82] Eucharistic solidarity teaches us to imagine, to hope for, and to create new possibilities. Because that solidarity enfolds us, rather than dismiss "others," we act in love; rather than refuse "others," we respond in acts of self-sacrifice—committing ourselves to the long labor of creation, to the enfleshment of freedom.

Yet the crucial social consequences of Eucharist can never overtake the real presence that Eucharist effects. At the table that Jesus prepares, *all* assemble: in his body we are made anew, a community of faith—the living and the dead. In our presence, the Son of Man gathers up the remnants of our memories, the broken fragments of our histories, and judges, blesses, and transforms them. His Eucharistic banquet re-orders us, re-members us, restores us, and makes us one.

Epilogue

"Slavery was the worst days that ever seed in the world.
They was things past tellin',
but I got the scars on my old body to show to this day."[1]

The body of the text does not belong to the text,
but to the One who is embodied in it.[2]

The primary subjects and the subject of my theologizing in this work are the dead, the "Many Thousand Gone." Through attending critically to the bodies of black women, I have expressed in the particular the universal claim of the inviolability and sacredness of black humanity and reaffirmed black dignity and worth. These broken black bodies lie beside the body of the crucified Jesus on the altar of my heart. This suffering—*his* and *theirs*—demands from me as a theologian a "praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying,"[3] a text that honors their enfleshing freedom.

For us, the living, their wounds can only evoke reverence and a firm purpose of amendment: these wounds reveal black women's moral and ethical, intellectual and spiritual courage, and disclose

the grave evil and spiritual disease of racist supremacy. Confession of sin for the wrongs committed against thir bodies is a condition for the possibility of engaging the humanizing and reconciling work of Christ on behalf of our redemption. Moreover, to place their black broken bodies beside his crucified broken body is a condition for a theological anthropology that grasps the sacramentality of the body in the concrete as an expression of the freedom of the human subject.

At a certain stage in the completion of this book, I came to recognize that this work might be read on several levels. Certainly, it is a constructive exercise in theological anthropology. As such, it mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix. In Bernard Lonergan's account of eight functional specialties in the theological task, communications—the last of the specialties—must be involved in each of the other seven. In writing about body, race, and being, I have tried to work dialectically, but with an eye toward foundations.

At the same time, I believe, this book may be read as a meditation on Toni Morrison's great novel *Beloved*. Hence, it gestures concretely toward a theology of re-membering and remembrance. This work also may serve as a meditation on the blues: "The blues," Ralph Ellison wrote, "is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."[4] What but enslavement could evoke such sorrow! What but the struggle to enflesh freedom could invoke such admiration! What but living black could produce such tragicomic blue joy! Jean-Luc Marion writes, that "theology, of all writing . . . causes the greatest pleasure."[5] For the theologian of the black experience, writing theology may also evoke the deepest sorrow, the deepest gratitude, the deepest love.